

Historic or just plain old? Ottawa Council decides fate of city hall

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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It's an issue that has created some strange political bedmates. Ottawa Mayor Jim Durrell, who is in favor of saving the building, has sided with aldermen well known for their heritage sympathies, such as Nancy Smith and Diane Holmes.

The heritage community has reacted strongly to the threat to city hall, fearing that its demolition could be the thin edge of the wedge for other heritage buildings in Ottawa.

FULL TEXT

John Bland quietly dropped by Ottawa City Hall recently for what could be a last look at his creation.

Part of the design team of Rother, Bland and Trudeau, the aging Montreal architect fondly surveyed the 29-year-old building he describes as "uncompromisingly modern."

Bland says that if city hall is saved from the wrecker's ball, controversy over its design will eventually give way to its acceptance as an important piece of architecture.

Bland is disappointed by last month's recommendation from a city committee to demolish the building and start from scratch with a new design for the Green Island site.

To Bland, the building has kept its "dignity" over the years. Renovating and adding a wing to the back, he says, would be the best solution to the city's space needs when Ottawa Council sits down today to vote on the building's future.

Either way - demolition or renovation - it's going to cost Ottawa taxpayers about \$60 million.

With the city's 3,000-member staff scattered in 14 locations across Ottawa, officials say a new or expanded city hall is essential to consolidating municipal operations and avoiding about \$1.4 million in annual rent.

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Holmes.

Among the demolitionists are aldermen such as Joan O'Neill and Mark Maloney, who are usually found in the heritage camp.

Either way, due to a lot of backroom arm-twisting by the mayor, today's vote is going to be close. Observers say it could be won by one vote.

Its supporters praise city hall as a fine example of "International Style" architecture. Its detractors call it just plain ugly.

Maloney said it "has no redeeming quality" and has recommended dynamite as a solution.

The heritage community has reacted strongly to the threat to city hall, fearing that its demolition could be the thin edge of the wedge for other heritage buildings in Ottawa.

Heritage architect Greg Utas pronounced city hall "a prime example of one of the most significant architectural movements of the 20th Century."

With the decision to retain city hall comes a \$16.5-million tab to gut and renovate it. The 12-storey addition would cost another \$43.3 million.

Although the needed repairs are typical of a building of that age, a 1985 consultant's report indicates city hall needs massive amounts of work.

Put simply, it leaks when it rains. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It should be upgraded to meet present-day building codes.

The mechanical and electrical systems need replacement. It needs new windows and the limestone panels on the outside are shifting.

Given all that, aldermen such as Jamie Fisher say the city is better off to level it and avoid costly overruns from unexpected repair work once it begins ripping down walls.

Many aldermen such as Darrel Kent maintain that trying to build an addition twice the size of the original building just won't work.

Bland disagrees, saying it was designed to permit an addition. With a good architect, the look of the building won't be compromised with a new wing, he says.

Fisher becomes almost evangelical about the architectural possibilities of a new building. Designing a city hall for the capital city and in the Green Island location would be one of the most sought-after architectural commissions in Canada, he says.

According to Fisher, a new city hall could make better use of the island, it could include a number of public areas and meeting rooms (something woefully lacking in the current building) and it could be something that all Ottawans would be proud of.

But a leading Toronto architect, Ed Zeidler says cost should not be the only consideration. A city hall, he says, should be more than an administrative tower.

"(City hall) is a symbol of the way we organize ourselves as citizens," he said.

He points to Toronto's 22-year-old city hall as good example of a building that captured the mood of a community when it was built.

As a last-minute compromise, Kent is suggesting that a competition be held for both renovating and adding a wing and for building a new city hall from scratch. That way, said Kent, council will be able to make a more intelligent decision, once rough designs are available.

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